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SUBJECT: PRT/BAMYAN: GOVERNMENT TAKES FIRST STEPS TOWARDS
ACCOUNTABILITY WITH DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Bamyán Provincial authorities may be unelected but they appear to grasp the idea that their legitimacy derives from the people. The Governor's office organized and hosted a PRT-funded two-day conference outlining ongoing development activity in Bamyán. Participants appreciated the conference and its information, although they challenged officials' claims of infrastructure and justice sector improvements. No one disputed the Chief of Police's unrealistically upbeat assessment of Bamyán's security environment. The Governor hopes to hold this conference semi-annually, both to inform the people about activity in the Province, and to goad lagging public officials into becoming more responsive. Based on post-conference activity by local officials, it appears the Governor will get her wish. END SUMMARY.

Who, When, Where, and Why

2. (SBU) Governor Habiba Sarabi hosted a two-day conference in Bamyán December 12 and 13, which was funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) through an MOU with the PRT. She invited participants from all seven districts, the Provincial Council, the press, international and non-governmental organizations, and the PRT to discuss activities in the Province during the last year. As Sarabi explained in her opening remarks, "people believe, incorrectly, that we are doing nothing, that the international community is doing nothing for the people of Bamyán. This conference will help dispel that myth."

3. (SBU) Over 200 participants sat through two days of marathon sessions in an unheated hall at Bamyán University (the only venue large enough to hold this many people) discussing progress in eight fields: infrastructure, gender, education, health, agriculture, refugees/returnees, security, and law and justice. Department directors from Rural Reconstruction and Development, Women's Affairs, Health, Agriculture, and Refugees and Returnees delivered PowerPoint presentations (prepared with considerable donor assistance) to the participants explaining: 1) accomplishments in the last year; 2) what gaps persist in that sector's efforts; and 3) what the government hopes to accomplish in the next six months. The Chief of Police, the Director of the NDS, and the Chief Prosecutor also discussed their own actions in the last year.

Participants Happy, but not with Infrastructure, Justice

4. (SBU) Participants expressed general satisfaction with both the idea of the conference and with the information received. A Tajik mullah from conservative Khamard District excitedly told the audience that "we (Tajiks in Saighan and Khamard Districts) did not belong in Bamyán until today." A participant from Waras District told us he could use this information to rebut exaggerated claims by former commanders and anti-government mullahs in his village. "This will boost everything we do, even DIAG," he told us.

5. (SBU) Participants did not treat every presenter with kid gloves, however. Participants outlined a litany of program needs, and angrily related example after example of infrastructure projects that had been mismanaged both by the Government and by donors. "People are tired of false promises," explained one man from Yakawlang. (COMMENT: Shura leaders frequently choose to interpret PRT comments that we will "see what we can do" as the same thing as "we promise to do." That deliberate misinterpretation exacerbates people's perceptions of infrastructure development. END COMMENT)

6. (SBU) Participants likewise had few kind words for the Chief Prosecutor Azizullah Hadafmánd or his office. "How can people be safe if no one arrested ever goes to jail? Where is the justice in that?" one man asked. The Chief Prosecutor's claim that his office is under-staffed and

under-funded rang hollow with the conference participants. "If you did your job better, you might find your resources could increase," said the Panjab District sub-Governor. One Provincial Council member expressed his outrage that one person had been in custody for over three years, and still no charge filed against him. "This is against the law and the conscience of the people," he fumed.

ANP Corruption the Elephant in the Room -----

17. (SBU) Chief of Police Wahadat's presentation was perhaps the most striking of the conference. Wahadat painted a fantastic picture of security and stability in the Province, claiming no armed groups operate in Bamyan. "If you want to be safe in Afghanistan, move to Bamyan," he said. He went further, saying that crime is practically non-existent, directly contradicting his own words from the previous week.

18. (SBU) Surprisingly, no one was willing to challenge that image. Even Governor Sarabi, who publicly has confronted Wahadat, his Deputy Abdul Malik, and some of the sub-district Chiefs of Police about corruption, chose to ignore the opening his remarks provided, and instead asked what the ANP was doing to mop up "pornography" in the bazaar. (COMMENT: We are unclear to what she may be referring. It is possible that pornographic materials are sold behind closed doors, but we believe it more likely that this refers to the several shops selling Bollywood DVDs. END COMMENT.)

Follow-Up (Mostly) an Encouraging Sign -----

19. (SBU) Governor Sarabi had two goals in hosting the development conference: 1) she wanted the Bamyan people to understand how much activity is going on in the Province; and 2) she hoped to provoke less-active government offices into action. It appears to be working, to some degree. The Communications department has its own PowerPoint presentation ready, which it will distribute throughout the districts, and plans to open a satellite office in Panjab. Agriculture Director Engineer Tahir is considering conducting his own one day seminar outlining agricultural activities, because "we are doing more than we can talk about in a 90 minute presentation." The Pilgrimage Department plans to make a presentation on Bamyan residents who travel to Mecca this year.

110. (SBU) Not every office understood the conference's underlying message, however. The Deputy Governor complained in subsequent meetings that the Conference "wasted" two days. "What good is it for people to get together to talk?" he said. The Education Director complained that he did not receive a "thank you" letter from the Governor, like others did. Rather than conducting more program activities, the Director of the Information and Culture Department wants someone to create a brochure for his agency so "we will look better" next time.

Comment: A Promising First Step -----

111. (SBU) The Governor's two-day conference yielded some positive results and was a qualified success, and both PRT and Emboffs will explore the possibility of funding similar conferences in the future. The event was the first chance for most of the participants to learn about activity Province-wide, an important measure in our effort to win over hearts and minds. Moreover, through vigorous question and answer sessions, the conference introduced a nascent element of accountability into actions by department directors, who legally are beholden only to Kabul.

112. (SBU) Still, participants and officials' reluctance to challenge the COP shows how far his shadow continues to extend, and how much work remains to be done, at least in the security and justice sectors. So long as ANP and Chief Prosecutor corruption remains this prevalent, no amount of public awareness can bolster local trust in the security organs.

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